The Real Adventure

A NOVEL

By Henry Kitchell Webster

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

—14—

Presently she came. A buffet of wind struck her as she closed the door behind her, and whipped her unbuttoned ulster about; but she did not cower under it, nor turn away—stood there, finely erect, confronting it. There was something alert about her pose—he couldn't see her face distinctly—that suggested she was expecting somebody. And then, not aloud, but very distinctly:

"Roddy," she said.

He tried to speak her name, but his dry throat denied it utterance. He began suddenly to tremble. He came forward out of the shadow and she saw him and came to meet him, and spoke his name again.

"I saw you when you went out," she said. "I was afraid you mightn't wait. I hurried as fast as I could. I've—w-waited so long. Longer than you."

He managed at last to speak, and, as he did so, reached out and took her by the shoulders. "Come home," he said. "You must come home."

At that she stepped back and shook her head. But he had discovered, while his hands held her, that she was trembling too.

The stage door opened again to emit a group of three of the "ponies."

They stared curiously at Dane and the big man who stood there with her, then scurried away down the alley.

"We can't talk here," he said. "We must go somewhere."

She nodded assent, and they moved off side by side after the three little girls, but slower. In an accumulation of shadows, half way down the alley, he gripped her arm tight and they both stood still. The next moment, and without a word, they moved on again.

Finally—"Are you all right Roddy? And the babies?" she managed to say. "It's a good many days since I've heard from Portia." And then, suddenly: "Was it because anything had gone wrong that you came?"

"I didn't know you were here until I saw you on the stage," he said.

This was all, in words, that passed until he looked about him in a sort of dazed bewilderment when she stopped, at last, at the stoop before her door.

"Here's where I live," she said.

"Where you live!" he echoed blankly.

"Ever since I went away—to California. I've been right here—where I could almost see the smoke of your chimneys. I've a queer little room—I only pay three dollars a week for it—but—it's big enough to be alone in."

"Rose . . ." he said, hoarsely.

A drunken man came lurching pitifully down the street. She shrank into the angle of the steps, and Rodney followed her, found her with his hands, and heard her voice speaking breathlessly, in gasps. He hardly knew what she was saying.

"It's been wonderful . . . I know we haven't talked; we'll do that some other time, somewhere where we can . . . But tonight, walking along like that, just as . . . Tomorrow, I shall think it was all a dream."

"Rose . . ."

The only sound that came in answer was a long, tremulously indrawn breath. But presently her hand took the one of his that had been clutching her shoulder and led him up the steps. She opened the door with a latchkey, and then, behind her, he made his way up two flights of narrow stairs, whose faint creak made all the sound there was. In the black little corridor at the top she unlocked another door.

"Wait till I light the gas," she breathed.

She turned and looked into his face, her eyes searching it as his were searching hers, luminously and with a swiftly kindling fire. Her lips parted a little, trembling. There was a sort of bloom on her skin that became more visible as the blood, wave on wave, came flushing in behind it.

As for Rodney, he was the same man who, an hour ago, in the theater, had raged and writhed under what he felt to be an invasion of his proprietary rights in her.

He wouldn't have defined it that way, to be sure, in a talk with Barry Lake; would have denied, with the best of them, that a husband had any proprietary rights in his wife. But the intolerable sense of having become an object of derision or contemptuous pity, of being disgraced and of her being degraded, couldn't derive from anything else but just that.

"Have you anything here," he asked her dully, "besides what will go in that trunk?"

It was the surliness of his tone, rather than the words themselves, that startled her.

"No," she said, puzzled. "Of course not."

"Then throw them into it quickly," he said, "and we'll lock the thing up. Do you owe any rent?"

"Roddy!" she said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're going to get out of this beastly place now—tonight. We're going home. We can leave an address for the trunk. If it never comes, so much the better."

Again all she could do was to ask him, with a bewildered stammer, what he meant.

"Because," she added, "I can't go home yet. I've—only started."

"Started!" he echoed. "Do you think I'm going to let this beastly farce go any further?"

And with that he told her what had happened in his office that afternoon, told her of the attitude of his friends, how they'd all known about it—undoubtedly had come to see for themselves, and, out of pity or contempt, hadn't told him. He told her how he'd felt, sitting there in the theater. He accused her as his wrath burned brighter, of having selected the thing to do that would hurt him worst, of having borne a grudge against him and avenged it.

It was the ignoblest moment of his life, and he knew it. The accusations he was making against her were nothing to those that were storing up in his mind against himself.

He didn't look at her as he talked, and she didn't interrupt; said no word of denial or defense. The big outburst spent itself. He lapsed into an uneasy silence, got himself together again, and went on trying to restate his grievance—this time more reasonably, retracting a little. But under her continued silence he grew weakly irritated again.

When at last she spoke, he turned his eyes toward her and saw a sort of frozen look in her dull white face that he had never seen in it before. Her intonation was monotonous, her voice scarcely audible.

"I guess I understand," she said. "I don't know whether I wish I were dead or not. If I'd died when the babies were born. . . . But I'm glad I came away when I did. And I'm glad," she gave a faint shudder there at the alternative, "I'm glad I've got a job and that I can pay back that hundred dollars I owe you. I've had it quite a while. But I've kept it, hoping you might find out where I was and come to me, as you did, and that we might have a chance to talk. I thought I'd tell you how I'd earned it, and that you'd be a little—proud with me about it, proud that I could pay it back so soon."

She smiled a little over that, a smile he had to turn away from. "I suppose I'll be glad, some day, that it all happened; that I met you and loved you and had the babies, even though it's all had to end," she shuddered again, "like this."

It wasn't till he tried to speak that her apparent calm was broken. Then, with a sudden frantic terror in her

Presently She Came.

eyes, she begged him not to—begged him to go away, if he had any mercy for her at all, quickly and without a word. In a sort of daze he obeyed her.

The tardy winter morning, looking through her grimy window, found her sitting there, just as she'd been when he closed the door.

CHAPTER XXI.

Frederica's Paradox.

Two days later Rodney walked in on Frederica at breakfast, alone.

"Hello!" Frederica said, holding out a hand to him, but not rising. "Just in time."

"Don't ring," he said quickly. "I've had all I want. My train got in an hour ago and I had a try at the station restaurant."

"Well, sit down, anyway," said Frederica. She reached out a cool, soft hand and laid it on one of Rodney's which rested limply on the table. There was rather a long silence—ten seconds, perhaps. Then:

"How did you find out about it?" Rodney asked.

They were both too well accustomed to these telepathic short-cuts to take any note of this one. She'd seen that he knew, just with her first glance at him there in the doorway; and something a little tenderer and gentler than most of her caresses about this one, told him that she did.

"Harriet's back," she said. "She got in day before yesterday. Constance said something to her about it, thinking she knew. They've thought all along that you and I knew, too." And then: "How did you find out about it, Roddy? Who told you?"

"No one," he said, in a voice unnaturally level and dry. "I went to see the show on the recommendation of a country client, and there she was on the stage."

"Oh!" cried Frederica—a muffled, barely audible cry of passionate sympathy. Then: "You've seen her off the stage—talked with her?"

"I didn't ask her to explain," said Rodney. "I asked her to come home and she wouldn't."

"Oh, it's wicked!" she cried. "It's the most abominably selfish thing I ever heard of!"

"Pull up, Freddy!" he said. Rather gently, though, for him. "There's no good going on like that. And besides . . . You were saying Harriet would do anything in the world for me. Well, there's something you can do. You're the only person I know who can."

Her answer was to come around behind his chair, put her cheek down beside his, and reach for his hands. "Let's get away from this miserable breakfast table," she said. "Come up to where I live, where we can be safely by ourselves; then tell me about it."

In front of her boudoir fire, looking down on her as she sat in her flowered wing chair, an enormously distended rug-covered pillow beside her knees waiting for him to drop down on when he felt like it, he began rather cautiously to tell her what he wanted.

"I'll tell you the reason why I've come to you," he began, "and then you'll see. Do you remember nearly two years ago, the night I got wet coming here to dinner—the night you were going to marry me off to Hermione Woodruff? We had a long talk afterward, and you said, speaking of the chances people took getting married, that it wasn't me you worried about, but the girl, whoever she might be, who married me."

The little gesture she made admitted the recollection, but denied its relevancy. She'd have said something to that effect, but he prevented her.

"No," he insisted, "it wasn't just talk. There was something in it. Afterward, when we were engaged, two or three times, you gave me tips about things. And since we've been married . . . Well, somehow, I've had the feeling that you were on her side; that you saw things her way—things that I didn't see."

"Little things," she protested; "little tiny things that couldn't possibly matter—things that any woman would be on another woman's side, as you say, about."

But she contradicted this statement at once. "Oh, I did love her!" she said fiercely. "Not just because she loved you, but because I thought she was altogether adorable. I couldn't help it. And of course that's what makes me so perfectly furious now—that she should have done a thing like this to you."

"All right," he said. "Never mind about that. This is what I want you to do. I want you to go to see her, and I want you to ask her, in the first place, to try to forgive me."

"What for?" Frederica demanded.

"I want you to tell her," he went on, "that it's impossible that she should be more horrified at the thing I did, than I am myself. I want you to ask her, whatever she thinks my deserts are, to do just one thing for me, and that is to let me take her out of that perfectly hideous place. I don't ask anything else but that. She can make any terms she likes. She can live where or how she likes. Only—not like that. Maybe it's a deserved punishment, but I can't stand it!"

There was the crystallization of what little thinking he had managed to do in the two purgatorial days he'd spent in a down-state hotel—in the intervals of fighting off the memory of the dull, frozen agony he'd seen in Rose's face as he left her.

Frederica, naturally, was mystified. "That's absurd, of course, Roddy," she said gently. "You haven't done anything to Rose to be forgiven for."

"You'll just have to take my word for it," he said shortly. "I'm not exaggerating."

"But, Roddy!" she persisted. "You must be sensible. Oh, it's no wonder! You're all worn out. You look as if you hadn't slept for nights. What if you were angry and lost your temper and hurt her feelings? Heavens! Weren't you entitled to, after what she'd done? And when she'd left you to find it out like that?"

"I tell you, you don't know the first thing about it."

"I don't suppose you—beat her, did you?"

It was too infuriating, having him meek like this!

His reply was barely audible: "I might better have done it."

Frederica sprang to her feet. "Well, then, I'll tell you!" she said. "I won't go to her. I'll go if you'll give me a free hand. If you'll let me tell her what I think of what she's done and the way she's done it—not letting you know—not giving you a chance. But go and beg her to forgive you, I won't."

"All right," he said dully. "You're within your rights, of course."

The miserable scene dragged on a little longer. Frederica cried and pleaded and stormed without moving him at all. He seemed distressed at her grief, urged her to treat his request as if he hadn't made it; but he explained nothing, answered none of her questions.

It was an enormous relief to her, and, she fancied, to him, for that matter, when, after a premonitory knock at the door, Harriet walked in upon them.

The situation didn't need much explaining, but Frederica summed it up while the others exchanged their coolly friendly greetings, with the statement:

"Rod's been trying to get me to go to Rose and say that it was all his fault, and I won't."

"Why not?" said Harriet. "What earthly thing does it matter whose fault it is? He can have it his fault if he likes."

"You know it isn't," Frederica muttered rebelliously.

Harriet seated herself delicately and deliberately in one of the curving ends of a little Victorian sofa, and stretched her slim legs out in front of her.

"Certainly I don't care whose fault it is," she said. "You never get anywhere by trying to decide a question like that. What I'm interested in is what can be done about it. It's not a very nice situation. Nobody likes it—at least I should think Rose would be pretty sick of it by now. She may have been crazy for a stage career, but she's probably seen that the chorus of a third-rate musical comedy won't take her anywhere. The thing's simply a mess, and the only thing to do is to clear it up as quickly and as decently as we can—and it can be cleared up if we go at it right. Of course the thing to do is to get her out of that horrible place as soon as we can. And I suppose the best way of doing it will be to get her into something else—take her down to New York and work her into a small part in some good company. Almost anything, if it came to that, so long as it wasn't music. Oh, and have her use her own name, and let us make as much of it as we can. Face it out. Pretend we like it. I don't say it's ideal, but it's better than this."

"Her own name?" he echoed blankly. "Do you mean she made one up?"

Harriet nodded. "Constance mentioned it," she said, "but that was before I knew what she was talking about. And of course I couldn't go back and ask. Daphne something, I think. It sounded exactly like a chorus name, anyhow." And then: "Well, how about it? Will you play the game?"

"Oh, yes," he said, with a docility that surprised Frederica. "I'll play it. It comes to exactly the same thing, what we both want done, and our reasons for doing it are important to nobody but ourselves."

She turned to Frederica. "You, too, Freddy?" she asked. "Will you give your moral principles a vacation and take Rod's message to Rose, even though you may think it's Quixotic nonsense?"

"I'll see Rose myself," said Rodney quietly.

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He was standing near the foot of the stairs when she came down, with a raincoat on and a newspaper twisted up in his hand, and at sight of her, he took off his soft, wet hat, and crushed it up along with the newspaper. He moved over toward her, but stopped two or three feet away. "It's very good of you to come," he said, his voice lacking a little of the ridiculous stiffness of his words, not much. "Is there some place where we can talk a little more—privately than here? I shan't keep you long."

"There's a room here somewhere," she said.

The room she led him to was an appropriately preposterous setting for the altogether preposterous talk that ensued between them. It had a mosaic floor with a red plush carpet on it, two stained-glass windows in yellow and green, flanking an oak mantel which framed an enormous expanse of mottled purple tile, with a diminutive gas-log in the middle. A glassy-looking oak table occupied most of the room, and the chairs that were crowded in around it were upholstered in highly polished coffee-colored horse hide, with very ornate nails.

"It's dreadfully hot in here," Rose said. "You'd better take off your coat." She squeezed in between the table and one of the chairs and seated herself.

Rodney threw down his wet hat, his newspaper, and then his raincoat, on the table, and slid into a chair opposite her.

"I want to tell you first," Rodney said, and his manner was that of a schoolboy reciting to his teacher an apology which has been rehearsed at home under the sanction of paternal authority—"I want to tell you how deeply sorry I am for . . ."

He had his newspaper in his hands again and was twisting it up. His eyes didn't once seek her face. But they might have done so in perfect safety, because her own were fixed on his hands and the newspaper they crumpled.

He didn't presume to ask her forgiveness, he told her. He couldn't expect that; at least not at present. He went on lamely, in broken sentences, repeating what he'd said already in still more inadequate words. He was unable to stop talking until she should say something. It hardly mattered what. And she was unable to say anything.

The formality of his phrases got stiffer and finally congealed into a blank silence.

Finally she said, with a gasp: "I have something to ask you to—forgive me for. That's for leaving you to find out—where I was, the way you did. You see, I thought at first that no one would know me, made up and all. And when I found out I would be recognizable, it was too late to stop—or at least it seemed so. Besides, I thought you knew. I saw Jimmy Wallace out there the opening night, and saw he recognized me, and—I thought he'd tell you. And then I kept seeing other people out in front after that, people we knew, who'd come to see for themselves, and I thought, of course, you knew. And—I suppose I was a coward—I waited for you to come. I wasn't, as you thought, trying to hurt you. But I can see how it must have looked like that."

He said quickly: "You're not to blame at all. I remember how you offered to tell me what you intended to do before you went away, and that I wouldn't let you."

Silence froze down upon them again.

"I can't forgive myself," he said at last. "I want to take back the things I said that night—about being disgraced and all. I was angry over not having known when the other people did. It wasn't your being on the stage. We're not as bigoted as that.

"I've come to ask a favor of you, though, and that is that you'll let me—let us all—help you. I can't—bear having you live like this, knocking about like this, where all sorts of things can happen to you. And going under an assumed name. I've no right to ask a favor, I know, but I do. I ask you to take your own name again—Rose Aldrich. And I want you to let us help you to get a better position than this, that is, if you haven't changed your mind about being on the stage; a position that will have more hope and promise in it. I want you to feel that we're—with you."

"Who are 'we?'" She accompanied that question with a straight look into his eyes.

"Why," he said, "the only two people I've talked with about it—Frederica and Harriet. I thought you'd be glad to know that they felt as I did."

The first flash of real feeling she had shown, was the one that broke through on her repetition of the name "Harriet!"

"Yes," he said, and he had, for about ten seconds, the misguided sense of dialectical triumph. "I know a little how you feel toward her, and maybe she's justified it. But not in this case. Because it was Harriet who made me see that there wasn't anything—disgraceful about your going on the stage. It was her own idea that you ought to use your own name and give us a chance to help you. She'll be only too glad to help."

During the short while she let elapse before she spoke, his conviction-carrying power of this statement ebbed somewhat, though he hadn't seen yet what was wrong with it.

"Yes," she said at last, "I think I can see Harriet's view of it. 'As long as Rose had run away and joined a fifth-rate musical comedy in order to be on the stage, and as long as everybody knew it, the only thing to do was to get her into something respectable so that you could all pretend you liked it. It was all pretty shabby, of course, for the Aldriches, and, in a way, what you deserved for marrying a person like that. Still, that was no reason for not putting the best face on it you could.' And that's why you came to find me!"

"No, it isn't," he said furiously. His elaborately assumed manner had broken down anyway. "I wanted you to know that I'd assent to anything, any sort of terms you wanted to make that didn't involve—this. If it's the stage, all right. Or if you'd come home—to the babies. I wouldn't ask anything for myself. You could be as independent of me as you are here. . . ."

He'd have gone on elaborating this program further, but that the look of blank incredulity in her face stopped him.

"I say things wrong," he concluded with a sudden humility that quenched the spark of anger in her eyes. "I was a fool to quote Harriet, and I haven't done much better in speaking for myself. I can't make you see. . . ."

"Oh, I can see plainly enough, Roddy," she said with a tired little grimace that was a sorry reminder of her old smile. "I guess I see too well. I'm sorry to have hurt you and made you miserable. I knew I was going to do that, of course, when I went away, but I hoped that, after a while, you'd come to see my side of it. You can't at all. You couldn't believe that I was happy, that I thought I was doing something worth doing; something that was making me more nearly a person you could respect and be friends with.

"So I guess," she concluded after a silence, "that the only thing for you to do is to go home and forget about me as well as you can and be as little miserable about me as possible. I'll tell you this, that may make it a little easier; you're not to think of me as starving or miserable, or even uncomfortable for want of money. I'm earning plenty to live on, and I've got over two hundred dollars in the bank."

There was a long silence while he sat there twisting the newspaper in his hands, his eyes downcast, his face dull with the look of defeat that had settled over it.

In the security of his averted gaze, she took a long look at him. Then, with a wrench, she looked away.

"You will let me go now, won't you?" she asked. "This is—hard for us both, and it isn't getting us anywhere. And—and I've got to ask you not to come back. Because it's impossible, I guess, for you to see the thing my way. You've done your best to, I can see that."

He got up out of his chair, heavily, put on his raincoat, and stood, for a moment, crumpling his soft hat in his hands, looking down at her. She hadn't risen. She'd gone limp all at once, and was leaning over the table.

"Good-by," he said at last.

"Good-by, Roddy." She watched him walking out into the rain. He'd left his newspaper. She took it, gripped it in both hands, just as he'd done; then, with an effort, got up and mounted the stairs to her room.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

DADDY'S EVENING FAIRY TALE

BY MARY GRAHAM BONNER

THE BANDED OCELOT.

"Far down in South America and Central America lives the banded ocelot," said Daddy.

"Gracious!" exclaimed the children. "What in the world is the banded ocelot? Is it an animal, a fish, fowl, or what? We've no idea. We've never heard of one."

"Mr. Banded Ocelot's name was Tommy."

"Sounds as though he might be a cat, if only he hadn't such a peculiar name," said Nick.

"He never could be a cat with a name like that," said Nancy, shaking her head. "Why in the world was he named Tommy?"

"He is a cousin of the cat family," said Daddy.

"Really!" exclaimed the children. "And with that awfully big, queer name. Not that it's so big but it's so queer."

"Of course not the Tommy part," added Nick, "only the other name—banded ocelot. It's mighty hard to say, I think."

"That's just what the banded ocelot thought," said Daddy, "and so he had all his friends and relations call him Tommy.

"Soon the friends and relations chose names like his which were simple and which they liked very much.

"Who Said You Were Interesting?" Asked Kitty.

There was one named Tiger, one named Puss, Kitty, Lucifer, Mrs. Coal and Snow.

"They were names which they had heard had been given to their cousins, the cats.

"'It's so much nicer,' said Tommy, 'to be called by a good, friendly name. Somehow there is nothing at all friendly, nor even sociable about the family name of banded ocelot. But then cats are always called by special names, and not just called cat, so we should be allowed nice extra names anyhow.

"'I'm really rather an interesting animal, when one comes to think of it,' he continued.

"'Who is coming to think of it?' asked Kitty.

"'I mean when I come to think of it,' said Tommy.

"'You've been here all the time. What do you mean by saying you have come to think of it? From where have you come? From where? I repeat. You're putting on airs and pretending you've been away for a journey when you've not moved from home.'

"'Don't get so excited, Kitty, you remind me of our other cousins. When a creature says he has come to think of a certain thing he means that he has just arrived at the point where it is thinking about it, that's all.'

"'A lot of senseless words about nothing at all,' said Kitty, snarling.

"'Purr, my love, purr,' said Tommy. 'There's nothing to get excited about. Have a cat-nap.'

"'What's that?' asked Kitty. She liked the sound of the word nap.

"'It's a sort of sleep enjoyed by our honored cousins, the cats.'

"'Haven't we any ocelet naps?' asked Kitty.

"'To be sure,' said Tommy, 'but it's so much easier to say cat-nap. It means a nice little snooze with one eye half-open ready for anything that may happen—from a morsel of food or a bowl of milk or an adventure and a wild chase.'

"'I know about such naps,' said Kitty, as she purred. 'I've had many a one myself.'

"'I haven't told you why I was an interesting animal,' said Tommy.

"'Who said you were interesting?' asked Kitty.

"'You'd better say so, for if you don't you are saying you're not interesting. You belong to the same family. If you say I am interesting, you are saying you are, too.'

"'Then I will say so,' said Kitty, who loved to be admired.

"'I am half-way between a tiger and a cat, and no other creature is just like me—except all my banded ocelot cousins. I purr and me-ow like a cat; I am wild at times like a tiger. I am a mixture of both and so I am very interesting. I belong to a wild, wild family and to the most domestic of all creatures—the household cat.'

"And all the banded ocelots who were listening purred as they agreed with Tommy, and said 'Me-ow, what you say is true.'"

Wise Wisher.

He is great who can do what he wishes; he is wise who wishes to do what he can.